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SUBJECT: SPANISH NATIONAL ELECTIONS: VIEWS BEYOND MADRID

Classified By: Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Political Counselor, for Reasons 1  
.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Spanish regional leaders in Valencia, Asturias, Andalucia and Extremadura from both the Socialist and Popular Parties believe the Popular Party will gain the most seats in the March 14 national elections. But most of them - except for two Socialist party members in regional Socialist strongholds and one PP operative - believe the PP may not win the absolute majority it needs to govern on its own. These leaders also indicated that foreign policy, including Iraq, will not be a deciding factor in the elections; economic and local issues touching directly on Spaniards' lives, will be the key issues. Their views comport with conventional wisdom prevailing in Madrid less than a week before the elections, set for Sunday, March 14. The last polls permitted before the national elections came out on March 8 - each with slightly varied results depending on the political affiliation of the polling organization. Indications remain that the PP will form the next Spanish government, but will have to fight until the waning hours of the campaign to try to win an absolute majority. End Summary

12. (SBU) Embassy political officers visited four important regions in Spain to take the pulse of regional leaders and gauge the impact of regional issues on the national elections. Two of these regions - Andalucia, and Extremadura -- are governed by well-known Socialist party bosses, both of whom are also frequently cited as possible replacements for Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) leader Jose Luis Rodriquez Zapatero if their party loses badly in the national elections. The regional Asturias government is a coalition of the Socialists and the radical United Left (IU) party. President Aznar's Popular Party (PP) governs the Valencia region and Valencia city's mayor is a prominent PP personality. Valencia has been identified, however, as a region the PP must target to win over undecided voters. None of these regions poses the kind of separatist or regional autonomy challenge of the Basque or Catalonia regions. But each prides itself in its distinct regional autonomy, characteristics and history.

#### ANDALUCIA: SOCIALIST STRONGHOLD

13. (SBU) The Popular Party is seeking to break the Socialists' 22-year hold on the Andalusian government in regional elections March 14. This will be the only regional election that coincides with the general election. However, polling indicates that the PP will have a difficult time dethroning Socialist "Baron" Manuel Chavez, the region's long-serving President. Indeed, some polling indicates that Chavez and the Socialists will win an absolute majority in the regional elections and thus be able to govern without coalition partners for the first time since 1994.

14. (SBU) Socialist, PP, and Andalusian Regionalist (Partido Andalucista) politicians with whom Poloff met in Seville on March 3 noted that Andalusia has historically deep leftist roots that work strongly in favor of the PSOE. They expect this to play out in the voting for the national election as well as for the Andalusian regional elections. The PP does well in urban areas and controls six of Andalusia's eight largest cities. However, the countryside, with its legacy of exploited peasants, remains solidly in the PSOE camp. If trends continue, this should allow the PSOE to carry the region in the national election on March 14. Both Zapatero and Rajoy have campaigned extensively in Andalusia.

15. (SBU) The PP hopes to narrow the gap, and ultimately overcome it, by appealing to the sentiment that the Chavez government is an inefficient patronage-based regime that stifles economic growth. However, many poor farmers in the countryside live off the patronage system (most notably an agricultural welfare system known as PER) and are fearful of reform. The Chavez government also controls the regional TV station, Canal Sur, the only source of news in some rural areas. Canal Sur's message is unabashedly pro-Chavez and pro-PSOE. While the polling outlook for the PP looks tough, PP strategists hope for a "hidden vote" in their favor since Andalusians are reluctant to admit to pollsters that they support the PP.

#### EXTREMADURA: SOCIALIST REGION, LOCAL ISSUES

16. (C) Extremadura's Socialist regional governor, Jose

Ibarra, is one of PSOE's key party leaders. His Chief of Staff, Ignacio Sanchez-Amor, indicated that Extremadura voters are less motivated by the issues that dominate the agenda of the national campaigns of both parties. Sanchez-Amor said that though unemployment is an important element in the national elections (with the PP able to claim a significant decline in unemployment since they took office), the issue is unlikely to bring voters out in support of the Socialist party nationally. He also admitted that the PP has actually done a good job of creating a good investment climate to reduce unemployment in Spain. He believes voters credit the PP for plans to extend the Madrid-Seville high-speed train all the way to Lisbon, which would benefit Extremadura. Though tolerant of PP national government, Extremadura's Socialists remain staunchly loyal to Juan Carlos Ibarra, President and Secretary General of the regional Socialist Party. Sanchez-Amor said voters admire Ibarra's willingness to speak out against PP "excesses."

17. (C) Both PSOE's Sanchez Amor and the Popular Party parliamentary candidate for the city of Badajoz warned us that national public opinion polling can be less than reliable. Sanchez-Amor dismissed polling that indicates a majority of Spaniards would like to see a change in government, saying that if this were true they would be far less passive this electoral campaign. He also discussed the composition of the some 23 percent who remain undecided. He said that most of the older undecided voters consist of conservatives, those who have no strong ideological position, or those who will chose a candidate at the last minute. However, younger voters, who were not active in the last elections and who have strong ideological tendencies, are likely to turn out in greater numbers in support of the Socialists.

18. (C) The PP's Pia-Sanchez believes the national polls are unreliable because voters tend to misrepresent how they intend to vote in informal telephone surveys, on which most Spanish polls are based. She also expressed concern that polls favoring the PP might discourage potential PP voters or mobilize potential abstainers who are against the PP. Finally, she states, the polls satisfy the interests of the party who requests them rather than reflect how people will actually vote.

19. (C) According to Sanchez-Amor, Spanish voters worry that Spain's support for US policies in Iraq created tension with their traditional EU allies. Nevertheless, Spain's foreign policy is unlikely to be deciding factor in this election, he said. Voters ideally want Spain to have influence within the EU while maintaining friendly relations with the US, no matter which party is in power after March 14. Pia-Sanchez said that Spain under the PP would remain a close ally of the US and an active partner in Iraq. However, she believes a PP government would focus more attention on cooperation with Latin America and the Middle East.

#### ASTURIAS: LINGERING TENSIONS FROM FRANCO ERA

10. (SBU) In the 1980's Asturias could be counted on to vote PSOE in national elections, but the PP edged even in 1993 and 1996, and pulled ahead in the 2000 congressional vote by a wide margin. The Asturias regional government is formed by a PSOE-IU coalition, marking only the second time since the restoration of democracy that the Socialists have not ruled alone at the regional level (the other being a four-year term of PP control in the 1990s). Of its nine Congressional seats, the PP currently holds five, the PSOE four and the United Left one. This year, because of Asturias' stagnant population growth, the region will receive only eight seats in Congress.

11. (SBU) Asturias' Autonomous Region President's Chief of Staff, PSOE member Maria Jose Ramos, told us that local concerns will dominate Asturias' voter choices in the national elections. These include the need to improve transportation links (especially those with its neighbors, Galicia, Cantabria, and the Basque region), solving the financial burden caused by unfunded mandates from the national government, employment and reducing home prices. She also said the region suffers because of its strained relationship with Minister-level officials of the PP national government. She said she expects the PP to win on March 14 (though without an absolute majority), but hopes that Rajoy's ministerial appointees will be more cooperative than Aznar's.

12. (C) PSOE representatives, including the party's leading congressional candidate Alvaro Cuesta Martinez, echoed the same PSOE themes and cited the region's strained relationship with the national government as the main issue in Asturias for this election, closely followed by transportation infrastructure and housing prices. They said they were expecting a PP victory nationally, and seemed resigned to the possibility that the PP would be able to govern with the four seats promised to them by the Canary Islands.

13. (C) The PP's top regional candidate, Alicia Castro, placed terrorism at the top of Asturias' issues, with employment issues a close second. She blames the Asturias region's "failings" on "incompetence" at the regional government level, stating that the PSOE local officials are slow to act on programs and projects that the national government has funded. In the national elections, she said she was confident of an absolute majority for the PP, stating that she expected around 177-178 votes for the PP, with even 180 as a possibility.

14. (C) Both political parties made a point to remind us of old grievances dating from the Franco era (Castro noting how the Communists burned Oviedo's cathedral in the 1930's, and Cuesta Martinez pointing out an interview excerpt in which an Aznar official purportedly expressed his admiration for General Franco). Because of its mining, steel and iron industries, the region has a long history in Spain's labor movement (with the local PSOE party celebrating the 100-year anniversary of socialism in Asturias), and the PP and PSOE camps appear to have a particularly bitter relationship.

VALENCIA: PP COUNTRY

15. (SBU) The PP won a convincing victory in Valencia in the 2000 elections, capturing 9 seats versus 6 for the PSOE, and hopes to repeat that feat in 2004. The PP benefits in Valencia, one of Spain's most economically dynamic regions, from the charismatic mayor of Valencia city, Rita Barbera. Barbera has won four terms and has a national reputation as one of Spain's best mayors. She recently helped Valencia win selection as site of the next America's Cup (since the previous winner, Switzerland, can't host).

16. (SBU) DCM and Poloff met with Barbera in Valencia in February. Barbera was confident that the PP would maintain its edge in Valencia on March 14. Political analysts Poloff met with in Valencia, including Socialists, shared this view. They conceded that the PP had governed well in Valencia and that this did not give the PSOE much of an opening. The PP has been pushing a national water plan that works to Valencia's benefit and this has won PP popularity as well. Nonetheless, some polls indicate that the PP's margin may drop by one seat on March 14, reflecting a general tightening of the race nationwide. Rajoy addressed his largest rally of the election campaign in Valencia on March 8, speaking before a crowd of up to 20,000.

ARGYROS